Transforming Visions for the Future: Ifa Fuyū's Search of Okinawan-Japanese Identity

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
Department of Philosophy

Masato Ishida

I

The life and work of Ifa Fuyū (1876-1947), the 'father of Okinawan studies,' continue to garner attention in post-war Okinawa-Japan discourse. His pioneering works in Ryukyuan linguistics, history, folklore, art, and religion have gained considerable respect over three quarters of a century, but he is also perceived as a multifaceted thinker whose reputation as a *public intellectual* is not completely settled. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the complex nature of Okinawan-Japanese identity that Ifa Fuyū sought for, which may have broad implications for our future vision about ourselves especially when seen through Japan's modernization after Meiji Restoration.

Born in Naha in 1876, Ifa grew up in a time of political and cultural assimilation. Japan's annexation of the Ryukyus began in 1872, which was brought to completion in 1879 when Okinawa prefecture replaced the Ryukyu Domain. Cultural, political, and educational reform followed to integrate Okinawa into Japan, which ranged from changes in hairstyle and attire to the promotion of standard Japanese and State Shintoism. Ifa himself started to learn standard Japanese at age 11 in primary school. He graduated from Third High School in Kyoto, and subsequently became the first Okinawan to earn a degree from Tokyo Imperial University in 1906 in the area of linguistics. His earliest aspiration was, however, politics, not linguistics.

The linguistic background Ifa obtained at Tokyo Imperial University helped him unveil the ancient Ryukyuan world dimly transmitted through *Omoro sōshi*, a compilation of Ryukyuan poems, songs, and oracles, which he later collated and published in 1925. He not only deciphered a language that had become largely impenetrable by the end of the 19th century but also made a number of discoveries that linked the Ryukyuan language to the Japanese language. In particular Ifa accumulated evidences that the Ryukyuan language contains a wealth of features that belong most distinctively to classical Japanese. He concluded that the Ryukyuan and Japanese languages branched off a common stem well before Asuka Period, a view endorsed broadly by historical linguists today.

Based on such research, Ifa often wrote that the Japanese and Ryukyuan languages were "sister languages" and also held that the people of Okinawa were "a distantly separated kin of the Japanese people." Toward Japanese mainlanders, Ifa wished to appeal to commonality and equality to win respect for Okinawans. For the people of Okinawa, he wanted them to modernize and to meet higher social and economic standards. From 1906 through 1925, Ifa offered over 350 public lectures on a variety of subjects, which included genetics, public hygiene, psychology, education for women, Christianity, and so forth, besides his extensive repertoire in Ryukyuan studies. He always gave his talk in fluent dialect so that the local audience could understand. In this respect Ifa was not just a scholar but a social reformist and a progressive community leader. It was a time when social Darwinism was influential too.

II

Although an overview of Ifa's philosophy as a whole may require many pages, his general or characteristic way of thinking receives relatively lucid expression in a short essay he wrote in 1919. On the Boy's Day, May 5, Ifa perceives what he fondly describes as "the philosophy of clothing of the Okinawan people" focused in an old Okinawan saying hummed by his wife. "Its meaning is," Ifa writes, "Oh new clothes, grow unsewn and tattered when no longer in need; Oh little child, do not worry about your clothes and outgrow them as you wish." Ifa then continues in the same article:

> A nation having institutions and organizations is the same as the body wearing clothes. As people, the substance of the nation, come to develop, we need to reform or abolish older institutions and organizations and adopt new ones, just as we would remake clothes, or sell them away to get new ones for the child to wear, when the clothes we got a year or two ago have been outgrown by the child. We ought to know that, when the substance has outgrown, and when we do not recognize that the form that used to fit it is now outdated, the form changes into nothing but a prison.

The point Ifa makes is clear: Social institutions are mere functions of the society that should continue to change in order to serve people, the "substance" of the nation, as opposed to people serving them. This includes religion. After spending much of his lifetime deciphering the highly religious text of *Omoro sōhi*, Ifa writes:

> Any beautiful system, once its mission is complete, would have it, as its own ideal, to yield its position to a new system and disappear. If, on the contrary, it exerts powerful

> influence even after its usefulness is exhausted, it would be liable to changing into a prison that enslaves people. [. . .] Viewed this way, it must be considered as a natural outcome that Ryukyuan Shintoism, a politically necessary system and institution up to a time, successfully fulfilled its mission and then declined, once the minds of the people had been united and fused together.

The latter half of the passage reflects the history of the second Shō Dynasty of the Ryukyuan Kingdom, but the point Ifa intends to make is general: Religion is interpreted as a social function, not substance, such that its fate ought to be determined by people.

By the same token, Ifa did not consider that the Ryukyuan or Okinawan language *must* be preserved, though he was a historical linguist *par excellence*. The ultimate ownership of language must belong to the people who use it, not to political institutions. He writes:

> Observe how one language of a country changes under the influence of the language of another country. First the vocabulary, then pronunciation, and then idiomatic usage; in such an order, changes take place. One can tell how far the changes have gone in the Okinawan language from the fact that an elder person around sixty or seventy cannot understand the Okinawan language now used by young people. The Okinawan language is on its way to extinction. I do not see this as a pity. [. . .] After all, language has its own life. When its mission is fulfilled, it would naturally disappear.

The word "naturally" is important. In Ifa's view, a particular language can simply die out when its life comes to an end. "I do not think," Ifa thus writes elsewhere, "a long life is left to the Ryukyuan language. [. . .] The Ryukyuan language is collapsing, but it cannot be helped." It is worth observing that a pioneering scholar of Ryukyuan religion and language is almost condoning their natural extinction, provided that they are not facing extinction by external coercion. As a linguist, Ifa is more than aware that hundreds of languages on Earth have disappeared in history – some naturally, some by oppression. Even an epidemic can cause a dramatic decline of language users leading to its extinction.

III

On my reading, Ifa's position is straightforward—he suggests that we think *people* first. We ought not to subordinate ourselves to language or religion for whatever reason. Quite the contrary, language and religion must live or die as the community, together with its *people*,

moves forward. It is equally important to note that no social institution becomes extinct without leaving traces behind. In the case of language, old word forms, including phonetic variations and loan words, continue their lives in modern language after the original language dies out. Agreeing with other linguists, Ifa writes: "From this too we can see that language is not like bamboo shoots just growing into bamboo stems; it is as though streams join together as they rush forward, cumulating impurity upon impurity and fattening up."

Given where we are today, it is certainly interesting to note Ifa's perception of Japanese diaspora in Hawaiʻi. Based on his four-month visit to the islands from October 1928 through February 1929, Ifa observed that "the disappearance of the Japanese language in Hawaiʻi is a matter of time." He further goes on to argue that Americans "had better not arouse anxiety among Japanese diaspora who made great contributions to the industrial development of Hawaiʻi; instead they should wait for their children to merge into the 'social and ethnic melting pot'." What Ifa has in mind in this passage is not only the simple fact that the Japanese language may not be inherited by *nisei* or *sansei* Japanese in Hawaiʻi, but the much subtler fact that culture grows thicker even when one culture completely dissolves into another. Even the debris of a dissolving culture fertilizes the soil for future growth in unexpected directions.

Accordingly, any religion or philosophy that refuses to take on new forms or interact with other traditions tends to become a prison for people. For example, Ifa observes that intellectuals in Okinawa had long been obsessed with the teachings of Zhuxi such that their minds became enslaved for centuries. After the annexation of the Ryukyus to Japan, however, people were finally: "exposed to living Buddhism, to the teaching of Yang-ming, to Christianity, naturalism, and to many other new thoughts. Is this not a phenomenon that deserves celebration? Being exposed to so many thoughts, it is abundantly clear that Okinawa, now and onward, should produce individuals that have never been seen around." As one might notice, American Buddhism in Hawaiʻi echoes a similar spirit.

In this way, Ifa Fuyū, the father of Okinawan studies, was a progressive thinker who held hundreds of public lectures not only on Ryukyuan themes but on modern science and Christianity. He was also the first director of Okinawa Prefectural Library who assembled collections of thousands of precious Ryukyuan documents, besides being the first modern linguist to decipher *Omoro sōshi*. Such an image of Ifa Fuyū as an impeccable humanist scholar remained largely intact until a slightly different perspective surfaced with the discovery of a small newspaper article that bore Ifa's name. Published in *Tokyo Shinbun* on April 3rd and 4th, 1945, and under the provocative caption "The Decisive Battle Field: Main Island of Okinawa," the discovered article of Ifa urges, or so it appears, that the people of Okinawa should take the imminent battle of Okinawa as an opportunity to prove themselves as loyal citizens of the Empire of Japan.

IV

The article opens with Ifa's words reactive to the U. S. Navy's landing on the Main Island of Okinawa that had happened on April 1st, 1945, just two days before Ifa's article went to print. He writes:

> The enemy has finally made a landing on the Main Island of Okinawa. Imagining how the Ryukyuan people, equipped with an intrepid nature, are fighting ever so bravely in their beloved province that has now become the battle field, I have earnest feelings welling up in my heart.

Accompanied with the subheading "Middle-Schoolers Armed for the First Sino-Japanese War," the typeset in bold font "Opportunity to Prove True Merit" is eye-catching and blends perfectly well into pro-war propaganda filling the pages. Ifa continues:

> Now they [people of Okinawa] must be fiercely fighting against the enemy as self-aware citizens of the Empire of Japan, the entire Ryukyus uniting together. The enemy has already reduced Naha to dust and ashes through extreme bombing, and has resolved to make the outrageous landing on the Main Island of Okinawa.
>
> Fortunately, our home province blessed with a warm climate is entering harvest time of taros. There is no worry over food shortage, and combined with the geographical advantage, nothing is lacking to crush the enemy's ambition. I hold high expectations for Ryukyuans engaged in this brave fight where the graves of their forefathers lie.

To be accurate, Ifa devotes greater space of the article to narrate his middle school recollections, the general place of the Ryukyus in East Asian history, and the importance of modern education in Okinawa. "In my opinion," Ifa writes, "what was greater and more valuable than sharing ethnic identity and the blood burning with love for one's homeland was the power of Japan's national education." In Ifa's view modern education gave Okinawans the opportunity to thrive in the rapidly changing world, but it did impose, on the other hand, a strong sense of nationalistic identity upon them, as Ifa's words indicate.

V

The discovery of Ifa's 1945 article stunned Ifa scholars as well as the public in Okinawa when it was reported in 2007. It sounded the least expected to come from Ifa Fuyū, who had long been caught in people's memory as a progressive democrat and peace-loving scholar dedicated to the study of *Omoro sōshi*. Was Ifa Fuyū yet another unfortunate stereotype Japanese intellectual who ended up being a conformist widely spreading pro-war propaganda just like numerous other journalists, literary critics, poets, Kyoto school philosophers, and wartime Buddhists?

A full analysis of the article would suggest that this was not the case, but in the interest of time, let me confine my observations to just a few points. First, Ifa did not think that the war would turn out victorious for Japan, despite the high-spirited language of the article. "From the very beginning of the war," Ifa's wife Fuyuko recalls, "he used to say that Japan would lose the war. He predicted early on that Okinawa would be attacked first in Japan." Nakasone Seizen, a close student of Ifa also recalls: "When the war broke out, Ifa, who had visited the U. S. and seen the country with his own eyes, deplored, 'What stupid thing Japan does. Fighting against such a huge country is sheer stupidity.'" Hence the obvious discrepancy between his general perception of the war and the literal expressions in the article calls our attention to possible motives behind his words.

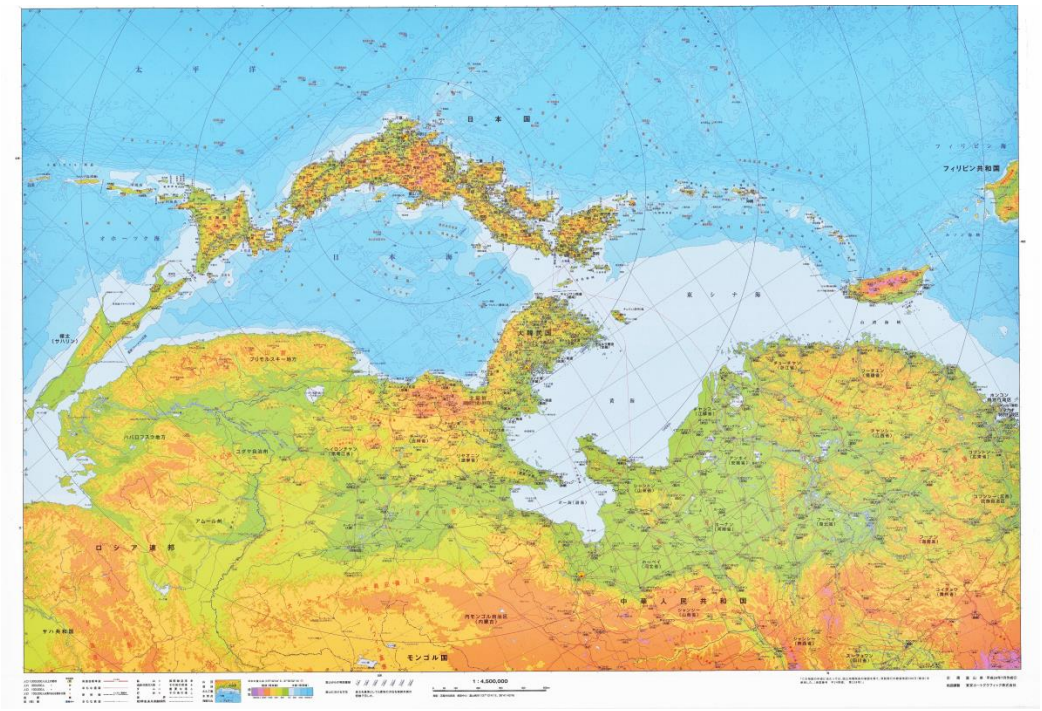
A second point to note is that Ifa could not have possibly expected Okinawans, now in the battle field, to pick up *Tokyo Shinbun* and feel empowered by his article, which simply means he had a different audience in mind. Ifa's article stresses that the Ryukyuan people are intrepid, competent, and loyal to the country, but it is all the more important to recall that the exact opposite had been attributed to Okinawans for several decades since the 1870s. Discrimination against Okinawans on the basis of disloyalty and lack of competence was first-hand experience for Ifa's generation. At a critical moment, when loyalty, competency and merit questions are in the air, it is hardly irrelevant to guard against social prejudice in Tokyo's headquarters. It may help to compare this with the Japanese American internment in World War II after Pearl Harbor and the later narratives of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team that contributed to the formation of Japanese American identity. This is what I take to be the more important side of the article.

A deeper reflection can also be made on the question of identity itself. What Ifa is arguing for in the article is mostly political or national identity, which does not need to coincide with, for instance, one's cultural, linguistic, or religious identity. Your ethnic identity can be Asian, your national identity can be American, your religious identity can be Buddhist, your linguistic identity English, your cultural identity Okinawan, without ever having multiple personality disorder. In Ifa's view, the Japanese people themselves "were probably able to form

a healthy nation because they absorbed the bloods of a number of ethnic groups and a multitude of new thoughts." The Japanese language itself was "a hybrid language" for him, which means that language alone cannot constitute one's identity either. In this sense identity in its genuine or authentic sense reveals complexity, not simplicity. Asking 'What is your *true* identity," often deriving from an impulse for identification, can easily transform into identity politics.

VI

I want to close my presentation with a quick visual, which I see as a trajectory growing out of Ifa's rich and broad view. The upside-down map shown below is called the *Atlas of East-Asian Countries on the Sea of Japan Rim*. Amino Yoshihiko, a controversial yet respected Japanese historian who made this map somewhat popular in recent years, makes the following observation:



The impression we receive from this atlas is genuinely refreshing such that we can obtain an image of Japan that is completely different from that of Japan found in the ordinary

> world atlas. [. . .] It offers us a visual confirmation of the extremely short distance that allows a clear view of the Korean Peninsula on fine days from the north edge of Tsushima. Further, the roles of the Japanese islands and the Southwestern island chain as connecting bridges are made salient; the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea on the map are reminiscent of the inland seas formed between the islands and the continent; this appears more to be the case with the Sea of Japan that vividly retains its image of a lake resting under the arms of the islands that were once continuous with the continent.

In this way Amino calls particular attention to the "false image of Japan" as an "island nation" isolated from the rest of Asia, which was in his view an image instilled into the Japanese mind by the Meiji government in the rapid modernization process.

For the purpose of my talk, I should keep it clear that the usual upright image of Japan and the Southwestern islands, on the one hand, and the inverted image thereof, on the other, do not exclude or replace each other. It does not make sense to ask "Which is *the* correct map?" Instead what I take to be much closer to the way Ifa Fuyū's thinks is to recognize such alternating perspectives as complementing and enhancing each other to form a thicker sense of identity. In real history, ethnic, national, religious, linguistic, and territorial identities rarely match, and they do not need to match. Collapsing them into one abstract concept of identity—implicitly demanding a monolithic, oversimplified concept of identity – is reductively violent. For such reasons, I wish to argue for the need of transforming our visions so as not to lose sight of who we have been and who we are here and now. Who and how we wish to be remembered by future generations is a question to be explored by all of us.